

Omnibus interviews novelist Meg Clothier

Meg Clothier studied Classics at Cambridge in the 1990s, and after taking time out to sail from England to Alaska began work as a journalist, first for the *Guardian* and then for Reuters. After a spell in Russia, she returned to Britain for another career change: her first novel, *The Girl King*, was published in 2011 by Century. Set in the court of medieval Georgia, it's an exciting romance rich in historical colour. Critics have praised it for its energy and invention, and its fresh take on the familiar genre of the historical novel. *Omnibus* caught up with Meg and asked her about her journey from classicist to best-selling author.

Why did you choose medieval Georgia as a setting for The Girl King?

I left Reuters in 2006 – I wanted a breather from news agency journalism and living abroad – to do a Masters degree in post-Soviet politics in London. I started on the course expecting to carry on and do a PhD, but the idea that came to me turned out to be for a novel, not a thesis.

I came across Queen Tamar when I was writing an essay about Georgian national identity and it dawned on me that she would be the perfect heroine for a swash-buckling historical romp – the kind of thing I love reading when I'm off duty.

I'd also spent a couple of magical holidays in Georgia and liked the idea of using a very happy time walking in the Caucasus mountains as raw material for a story.

In your Georgia, there's a strong sense of classical legacy. Warriors are compared to Achilles, characters own copies of the Iliad, there are allusions to other figures from myth like Pelops and Hippodameia. But at the same time, there's a very unclassical feel to this world of Christians and Muslims. Was this tension between the classical and the non-classical in your thinking when you wrote the book?

Very much so. Georgia looked west to the empire of Byzantium and thereby to ancient Greece, but was (and is) also a profoundly Christian country. The reference to Pelops and Hippodameia is a direct quote from the Georgian annals which were the main source for my book, and these texts constantly reference both the classical and the biblical world.

I am naturally more at home with clas-

sical allusions – if I'd had an infinite amount of time to write the book, I'd have liked to add a deeper sense of the characters' Christianity ... but there's always unfinished business like that in writing.

When your characters speak of the Greek world, they use forms that will be unfamiliar to many readers: 'Greeks' are 'Hellens', 'Achilles' is 'Akhilleus', and so forth. What was your thinking behind defamiliarizing them in this way?

I wasn't trying to write the purest form of historical fiction (when a book tells a story that is as close to history as it possibly can be) so much as trying to write a story inspired by history. So I think the technique you mention is probably a coded way of hinting that what you're reading is not unreal and yet not altogether real.

It might also be the result of reading too much fantasy literature when I was growing up ... I've noticed the same effect just recently while reading George R. R. Martin's addictive *A Song of Fire and Ice* books, which are packed with characters called Petyr or Eddard – almost, but not quite, what you expect.

The baddies in the story are the Seljuks, the Turkish empire to the south. Did you worry that readers might perceive contemporary resonances here, and see the story as demonizing Islam?

This was a real problem. I categorically did not want to write a Christians versus Muslims story although it's hard to pin down why not – after all it's undeniable that Christian Georgians were fighting Muslims, but I suppose that in the current

geopolitical climate I would have felt that I was (in some microscopic way) adding to the 'them versus us' discourse (and who wants to do that ... ?).

In *The Girl King*, ducking the bullet as it were, I downplayed the religious aspects as much as I could, and stressed that the conflict was as much over land and power as anything else – which I am sure it was. I wanted the story to be a story, not some kind of parable for what is going on today.

The book is centrally about a girl who becomes a woman. Greek and Roman literature is in general less generous towards strong female figures! I suppose there is Vergil's Dido, but she is written out of a primarily male story; Tamar, the heroine of your story, by contrast takes on a man's world and wins out. Was the gendering of traditional storytelling something you deliberately aimed to confront?

The words Dido speaks before she kills herself –

I founded a famous city, I have seen my own walls...

Fortunate me, alas too fortunate, if only Trojan ships had never touched our shores.

– have always struck me as impossibly sad. She was a great ruler, she lived, but she was undone by love. At the other end of the spectrum is the great female ruler who renounces love in order to survive at the top (think of Cate Blanchett at the end of the 1998 film *Elizabeth* painting her face white and transforming herself into the Virgin Queen).

The tension between love and duty is key to many stories about women, and is a big part of Tamar's, so I did think a great deal about how she would have functioned as a woman and a leader and how she could have made herself so powerful and yet so beloved.

But I have always loved reading stories about women succeeding in a man's world against all the odds, and really enjoyed writing a character that fitted squarely in that mould – a woman who won through, who ended up neither sidelined nor abandoned, neither raped nor murdered – nor defining herself purely in romantic terms.

It's also a classic story of forbidden love. Did you have any narrative models in mind? Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe?

Romeo and Juliet?

I have to admit that the models I initially had in mind were probably more 'rom-com' than literary – you know the kind of story where the heroine loves the bastard and only realizes right at the end that the nice guy is the one she should be with – or it turns out that the guy you thought was a bastard was actually nice all along?

I kept trying to write *The Girl King* that way, to fit my story into that template – but Sos kept on refusing to be a bastard (I was surprised to find it's true that your characters do sometimes take charge; I always thought that was a writerly conceit), which is why the story has the Pyramus/Thisbe flavour – a fair amount of innocence, blushing glances, snatched moments, and so on.

Ancient poetry and novels are very rich in descriptions of love and desire. Did you find these at all useful when thinking about the romantic elements? In fact, to me it felt more as if you were looking to give the love theme a 'timeless' feel that spoke directly to readers today: is that fair?

I did steal some of the phraseology from two contemporary (to Tamar) Georgian poems, but only in scenes where Tamar is irritated and frustrated by stereotypical flowery love-making – 'her face bedazzled the morning star' etc.

I often (although certainly not always) found the descriptions of desire in ancient poetry a little too pat for my taste – they seem to describe a sort of beautiful every-woman. Sos makes this mistake after he first meets Tamar – 'His imagination softened her, added curves, made her a woman, made her like all women.' Whereas in reality, I took care never to describe her as beautiful – striking, compelling, alluring, yes, beautiful, no.

When it came to the dialogue, you're right, I did choose a very modern-sounding idiom, which does differ from the tone in some of the more public scenes. I was going with the idea that most people can speak in many different registers – from the very formal to the very informal. So Tamar and Sos have conversations that would hardly sound out of place in the pub, while at other times they do sound much more 'epic'.

What about the type of English the characters speak, is that shaped by your, or your sense of your readers', expectations about 'heroic' language? And your descriptions often sound almost Homeric in their epithets and similes: 'winter-hungry' wolves, 'Tamar's temper was souring faster than a noonday pitcher of cream'. Was this something you were conscious of?

Yes – and it was nearly a lot worse! When

my husband was reading early drafts I'd often find whole sentences with 'aaaaaargh' scribbled next to them. It's a fine line between mock-epic and epic, and I was frequently on the wrong side of it. Trying to write like Homer is only going to end in disaster ...

As an aside, you might have noticed there are rather a lot of water / wind similes – that's because sailing is something I understand that would have been in many ways the same then as now. It was a relief – as I am otherwise a very urban person – to have something to draw on when writing a very non-urban book.

I know you're interested in Petronius. Did any ancient novels influence you in the writing of the book?

If Petronius chanced upon *The Girl King* in the afterlife, I'm sure he'd think most of the characters were far too upright and honourable and straight-up heroic to be all that interesting. But I hope he might enjoy my second one a little bit more. It is set in Constantinople, a city at the heart of a degenerating empire, and there should be a great deal more gratuitous violence, sex, and over-eating, all of which strike me as more Petronian.

Can you give us a little taster of the next book?

I'm nearing the end of the first draft, which means I'm at the stage where I hate pretty much every word I've written and want to throw my laptop in the bin! (It was just the same with *The Girl King* ...)

But although I can't quite bear to share any actual words with you, I will say that it opens with a French princess trying to get her head around classical Greek, which meant I had to dig out my old JACT *Reading Greek* textbooks to check my grammar hadn't deserted me over the last ten-plus years ...

When I first thought about doing Classics at university and bought those books in the lower six at school, I hardly imagined they'd be on call as research for a novel.

Thank you, Meg, and good luck!

Meg Clothier was talking to Tim Whitmarsh who teaches Classics at Corpus Christi College Oxford.